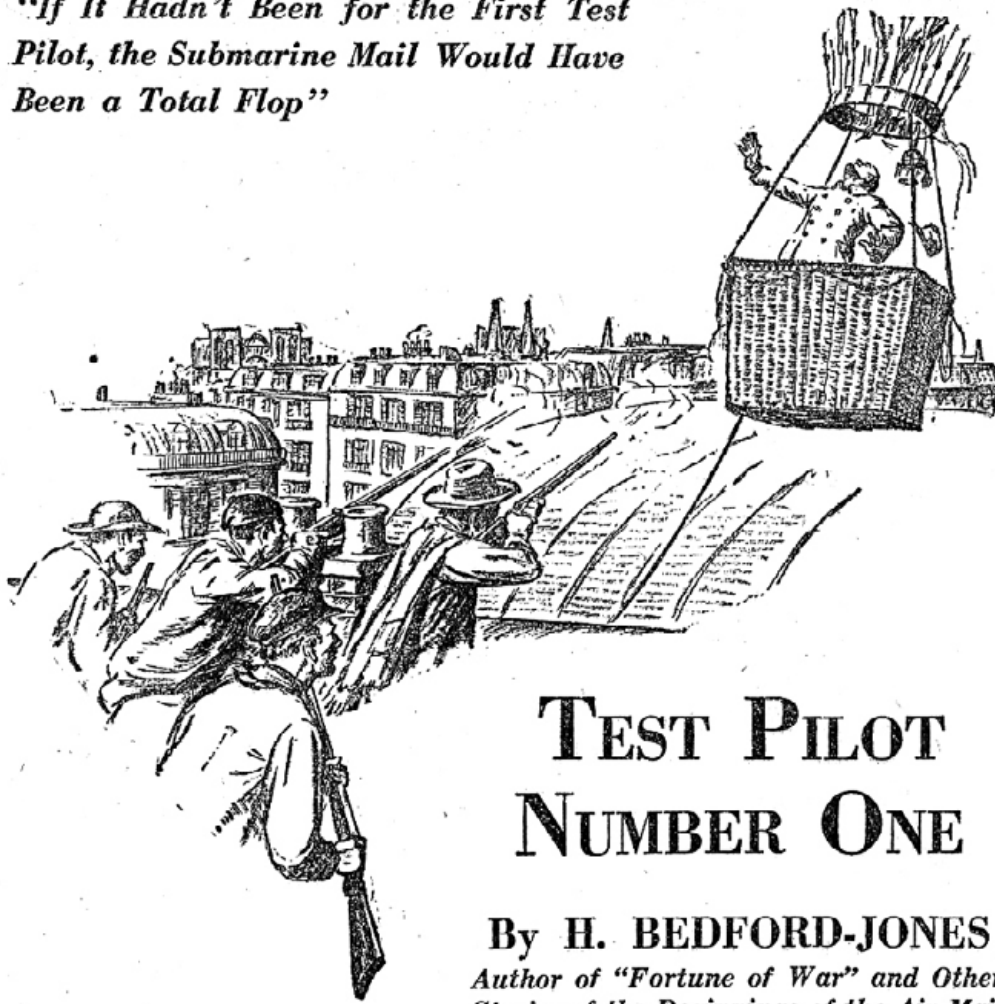


*"If It Hadn't Been for the First Test Pilot, the Submarine Mail Would Have Been a Total Flop"*



## TEST PILOT NUMBER ONE

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Stories of the Beginnings of the Air Mail*

IT WAS a hot afternoon in Paris, which means that it was hot. Giraud was bald as a billiard ball, absolutely; he was mopping his bald pate when he made his surprising statement.

"If it hadn't been for the first test pilot in aviation history," he observed, "the first submarine mail would have been a total flop."

He had come over from home about some airplane contract with the French government. Although born French, Giraud was an American citizen. Further, he was an Early Bird, one of the oldest pilots alive and probably the best.

I ran into Giraud, we both ran into

Pollack, and Pollack took us up to the aviators' club in the Bois de Boulogne, near the Porte Maillot. Pollack was growing bald too, these days. He was a spot ahead of me, but both of us were better off than Giraud, who had not a hair on his head behind his eyebrows.

"Germans pulled the first submarine mail during the war," said Pollack.

"Nope," stated Giraud in his positive way, running his eye over the room.

This club was a curious place, more American than French; most of the members, like Pollack, were old Lafayette Escadrille men. It was hung with trophies of all descriptions, souvenirs, mementoes

of famous fights, flights and crashes.

"I have a letter in my pocket you boys ought to frame and hang up here," went on Giraud, ordering another drink. "But I mentioned the first test pilot—that was Forain. He was French-American, like me. And he had too many brains to keep his hair—like me. I might even add, like others." His twinkling gaze touched on me and Pollack. "Forain was a good technician. One of the first to volunteer for the air service."

"I never heard of any Forain," Pollack said thoughtfully.

"Before your time. Back in 1870—the first air mail."

Pollack looked bewildered. "No air mail then, man! Or submarines either!"

"No? Think back to the siege of Paris," said Giraud. "The Prussian idea was to break down the morale of Paris and France by cutting off the capital completely. They did so. They even found a secret telegraph line sunk in the River Seine, and cut it. Paris sent out a regular service of balloons, the first air mail. The pilots were aeronauts, seamen, volunteers; they got the mail out, but could get none in. Hence, the submarine mail."

"I think you're cockeyed, but you're interesting," Pollack said. "To qualify as submarine mail, it would have to be a government project, with special letter rates and so on."

"That's what it was," retorted Giraud. "The Prussians even stretched nets across the Seine to keep out floating bottles. No balloons could get back to Paris. Then, in the greatest secrecy, a project was devised that promised full success. That's where Forain's girl came in."

"Pilots had girls in those days? Impossible!" I exclaimed. Giraud chuckled raucously.

"And what a gal! Marie Leon was a bright star in a dark sky. She lived near the

old Nationale bridge, in a tremendously lousy quarter of Paris. Her folks were communists. All that quarter was composed of communists, who hated uniforms and authority. But not Marie; she had brains! Also, she had a job in the post office of that quarter. And she had Forain. And Forain intended to get Marie out of this environment and start fresh back in America with her. There's the needed background."

Giraud took out his wallet and produced a transparent envelope containing an old stained, discolored letter.

"I wish I had a picture of that gal," he said, wistfully, shaking his bald head. "If you're ever in Cincinnati, I can show you one. Her grandchildren live there. At the time, she was only nineteen, but there was no nonsense about her. She conveyed an impression of quiet capability, of true steel—that's it, true steel! May not sound much, but it's a big thing to find in a woman. When you looked into her face, as Forain gazed into it that night on the bridge, you felt this quality in her."

THAT night on the bridge, a cold December night in clear white light of stars, Forain had the feeling full force as he met her, clasped her hand, leaned on the railing of the bridge. It was not her shapely body, nor her alert, vivid intelligence and loveliness of feature; it was something deeper.

"You know, I feel as though I could count on you for anything, for ever!" murmured Forain, bringing her fingers to his lips. "I've had that feeling since our first meeting."

She laughed softly. "You're the same sort of person yourself, my dear! Just to know you makes life different. But I'm afraid of these meetings—for you. There's a storm gathering, the Commune is taking form; my father, my brothers, our friends,

are in it. All the lowest classes are talking about loot and bloodshed and, revolution. And if you're seen here, in this army overcoat, it'd be just too bad."

"Bah! The bridge is guarded," Forain glanced at the pacing figures of sentinels under the bridge-end lights. "Besides, it's too cold for anyone but lovers to be in the streets! Besides, my dear, this bridge is going to make history; and you're going to help in the making."

"The history of our love and lives?" she demanded archly. Holding a light to his pipe, he grunted dissent, then leaned his elbows on the railing and spoke under his breath, warming her cold hands in his own.

"Here's a secret of the deepest, Marie; a word to anyone might mean disaster, for Prussian spies are everywhere: A plan has been devised to bring mail into Paris. I've been working on it as technical expert."

Her fingers closed his lips.

"Don't tell me! I don't want to know any government secrets, my dear. It's too dangerous."

"Wait," he broke in. "Here I need your help, I need it vitally!"

"That's different." She drew the shawl tighter about her head and relaxed. "You can count on me:"

"Of course; isn't that exactly my thought?" He laughed joyously. "They say not five people in Paris know the project; you make six, and the most important of all! For upon you will depend its success or failure. All the wise men, all the officials, laugh at me; you shall help me laugh at them."

"With all my heart; and together we'll laugh at the whole world!" she exclaimed. "But first, the siege must be finished."

"And the Prussians defeated; this project will have tremendous effect upon French morale," said Forain. "I can't tell you about it now; too blasted cold here.

Can you come over to the factory tomorrow afternoon?"

The "factory" was the Gare d'Orleans, turned over to Godard Bros., government contractors who turned out the air mail balloons.

"Yes; I could get there about three, for an hour," she said. "But to reach you is impossible. It's the most closely guarded place in Paris."

Forain laughed, and fumbled in his pocket. From the other side of the city drifted a rumble and mutter; the Prussian batteries were thundering. He extended a folded paper to the girl.

"Here's a special pass I got for you; it'll remove all difficulty."

She took it, tucked it away. "Good. Expect me, then, at three." She turned sharply, and caught her breath. "Ah! Here's trouble. My brothers—"

"Slip away, quickly!"

"Not I," she spat out scornfully.

FOUR men were slouching along across the bridge, so obviously low-class Parisians that the sentries paid no heed; Marie's two brothers, and two friends, gutter rats who had somehow evaded military service.

They came on silently, intent, shuffling about the two figures and halting.

"Fine gentleman from America, eh?" said one. "Army coat. You'll be stood against a wall with the rest of the aristocrats, if you live that long."

"He won't," said one of Marie's brothers. "You! We've warned you before this to let our sister alone—"

Marie flamed out furiously angry words. With the callous cruelty and contempt of his kind for a woman, her brother caught her arm and dragged her toward him, slapped her across the face—and was driven headlong in the muddy snow by Forain's fist.

"To me, comrades! To me, soldiers!" Forain lifted his voice, seeing a glint of steel in the starlight. He whirled on the nearest figure, lashed out again, dodged a knife, and drove his fist into a third.

Amid cries of rage and dismay, the four took to flight—soldiers were coming on the run, and this use of fists outraged all Parisian standards violently. Only American savages used their fists, especially with such pronounced effect. Marie, seeing the peril over, also took to her heels and was gone. The two soldiers ran up.

"Ha, comrade!" exclaimed one, at sight of the army overcoat. "Don't you know better than to play with the women in these parts? The canaille around here would sooner knife one of us than kill a Prussian!"

"Your uniforms frightened them off; thanks a thousand times!" said Forain, with a laugh. He passed over a coin. "Drink to love at the nearest bistro, comrades, with my compliments!"

"Better luck next time," was the ironical response. "Look, comrade; if these devils of communists ever get their way, it's death and rape and loot everywhere! They'll burn Paris if the Prussians don't."

"After which," Forain said cheerfully, "the rest of France will stand them against a wall, eh? Well, good night!"

He swung off for home, little thinking that in this exchange of words had lurked prophecy, and that the ashes of Paris would be quenched in the blood of thirty thousand communists. That this encounter might result in oddly unpleasant results for him was far from his thought; he reckoned the matter ended, and only hoped that Marie would escape disagreeable consequences.

The Gare d'Orleans, next afternoon, was a busy place, despite the absence of all rolling stock. Forain, who was very

largely a free-lance worker, came back from a belated luncheon to find that Rampont, head of the entire postal administration and organizer of the air mail, was somewhere about the place, and proceeded to run him down.

In the vast shed of steel and glass, warmed now by gas, immensely long tables with women workers were installed; here the percaline fabric of the bags was sewn. Bags in all stages of completion hung from the high rafters—the distinctive yellow and red or blue bags of the Godard manufacture. Some were being oiled or varnished. Others were undergoing the contract tests—suspension, inflated, for ten hours, and afterward sustaining a weight of five hundred kilograms.

FARTHER on, a corps of marines detached for this work were weaving the willow baskets or fabricating the rope net-work that surrounded the bags and sustained the baskets. The place was a pandemonium, and equipment lay on all sides—grapnels and coils of line, instruments of various kinds, ballast bags.

Rampont, an active, energetic man of forty, abandoned his talk with the engineering staff at sight of Forain, and took the latter aside.

"Any word from outside, M'sieu?" asked the American.

"Yes; a pigeon came in today with a message from the government at Tours," was the eager reply. "The process has been tested satisfactorily; the government has accepted it."

"A special rate of one franc has been established for the service. Construction of the spheres is going forward. The first ones will be launched on January 2nd, ten days from now; four per day will be put into the Seine."

"And my recommendations?" asked Forain. The other shook his head.

"My friend, nothing is said about them. I'll say frankly that no one has taken them seriously; the formula which you gave for phosphorescent paint has been ridiculed."

"So?" Forain's eyes narrowed. "Then I'll tell you something. I've written to Robert, who's handling matters on the outside for the project. I've given him the formula and told him to use the paint. I happen to know him rather well, and I'm certain that he'll test out my methods. After all, it's in behalf of France. I get nothing out of it."

Rampont spread his hands. "My dear fellow, I'm quite helpless! Your theory is good, I admit; but apparently there's been a lot of trouble, in the administration, over this whole project."

Forain grunted. "Do you know where the test will be made?"

"No. I imagine at Bray-sur-Seine, just above the Prussian-occupied territory."

"Then on January 5th we'll have results. If my calculations are right."

"Perhaps then, perhaps never," said Rampont, with a shrug. "By the way, the Prussians have had the kindness to send us some bad news. The *Ville de Paris*, which left on the 15th, was brought down or was landed in enemy territory; total loss. The *General Chanzy*, which left day before yesterday, was caught in a change of wind and landed in Bavaria, total loss."

Forain whistled. "Bad! When are you going to put me up for active service and give me a balloon?"

"When you cease to be of greater service here, my friend. Patience! You're on the list of accredited pilots. Continue, I beseech, with your work here."

Forain left the huge train-shed frowningly. Two balloons down within a week! Bad indeed; a heavy loss in air mail, besides.

Both landed in enemy territory. This

indicated that his experiments, his work on different instruments, was badly needed. He had devised simple indicators, but he must do better.

The pilots were, as a rule, seamen or volunteers from other branches of the service, and after a minimum of crude training took out the mail on their first solo flight. Experienced aeronauts, like aneroids and other instruments, had been rapidly used up in the first two weeks. The siege had now lasted full three months, balloons were going out every two or three days as conditions favored, and the problem of affording inexperienced pilots simple apparatus to indicate speed, height and direction was no easy one to solve.

AT THE gas-pits where the ascensions took place, in the train yards beyond the station, Forain passed the guards and found two inflated bags ready for testing. The mail went out only at night, to avoid de Prussian gunfire; thus, during the day he had the place to himself. By means of captive balloons, he was making some extra-contract tests, and working on his instrument devices as well.

Five to three. His preparations made, he spoke to the workmen.

"In five minutes I'll go up, with a passenger, remaining an hour. One thousand feet; the usual signals, for hauling in or letting up. Remember, we're trying this new type of basket and heaters, so be ready for any emergency."

The heaters were foot-warmers of new type, holding hot water, for the comfort of pilots; no flame, of course, could be installed close to the gas-filled bag.

At three o'clock, almost to the instant, Marie appeared, displayed her pass and her papers, and greeted Forain with smiling eagerness. He handed her into the basket and followed, with a pretty compliment on the new coat she was

wearing; at his signal the lines were cast off. The balloon, attached by a single cable, soared up and up. Marie clung to the edge of the basket, overcome by the novelty and wonder of all Paris spread below her—or at least, a goodly part of it.

Then, turning, she found Forain beside her.

“Alone at last, with the stars and the angels and the sunbeams!” he exclaimed, and taking her hands, kissed her. She flushed, glanced around, and with a burst of laughter kissed him again.

“There! In sight of all Paris!” she exclaimed merrily. “And to think no one could see! But, my dear, I’ve news for you.” She sobered, as though the cannon-roll from Mont Valerien had brought recollection. “Those brothers of mine have sworn vengeance.”

“Bah! They don’t worry me, except as you’re concerned. Any trouble last night?”

She shrugged. “Naturally; it’ll pass. But give them credit for vicious hatred, my dear. Watch yourself. Such men hate all good men like you, and I’m afraid for you.”

Forain made light of her fears, held her in his arms, and laughed at her delight as more of Paris unfolded. There was little wind; the balloon was scarcely pulled over at all by its anchoring cable. With the heaters, the keen December cold was unnoticed.

“Now to business; look at Paris, while I make some notes,” said Forain. “Then we’re free to talk.”

**N**OTEBOOK in hand, he jotted down observations on the new basket with its placements for ballast, mail pouches, apparatus; on the heaters and their position, on the value of the two strapontins, or folding seats, attached to the basket edge. Then he put up the notebook, finding the bag tugging in a

freshening breeze, and signaled with a flag. The balloon was brought down a hundred feet, and once more floated level.

“Sit down, be comfortable,” he said, and stood beside her, hand in hand. “My dear, now for the project. It’s going through. We know that the Prussians have stretched nets across the river, so nothing can float down to Paris; they’ve seconded the nets with sunken booms to prevent anything slipping under. The only thing they don’t guard, and can’t guard, is the river bottom itself.”

She grimaced whimsically. “But these devils of Prussians can do even that!”

“Not likely. The idea is to take a zinc ball, or rather oval, about the size of a child’s head; this will hold from five to eight hundred letters. It is soldered tightly, hermetically sealed, weighted so it sinks to the bottom. Around this ball are fins; just as a water-wheel is turned, these fins are turned by the current, so the ball is carried along the bottom. It will, in short, find its own way down to Paris. Simple?”\*

“Apparently,” she said cautiously. “How can it be kept secret?”

“Not a soul knows or will know, but the few people in on it. Anyone desiring to get a letter to Paris puts on one franc postage, instead of the usual twenty centimes, and marks the letter “Paris, by way of Moulins on the Allier.” Letters so marked go to this secret way; and theoretically are picked up here at Paris.”

“How?” she demanded. Forain laughed, delighted by her acumen.

“There’s the rub; if they escape Prussian nets, they’ll escape ours. Experiments prove that these balls find their own way past all obstacles. However,

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\*All fact; author can furnish sketch of the zinc ball, etc.

the spot where they'll be picked up here is under the Pont Nationale, the bridge close by your charming home. The first go into the river on January second, and I figure they'll show up here not later than the fifth. A sunken metal net will be stretched under the bridge to catch them."

**S**HE knit her brows, looking at him, puzzled. "The river's shallow there, except at one place," she said, slowly.

"Correct. And oddly enough, my dear, there's a strong secondary current along those shallows. Now we come to the point."

Forain paused. "None of those balls will be picked up. I've predicted this. Not a single one!"

"Eh? Why not?"

"Because the asinine officials won't listen to me. They'll fish each day along the upstream line of the net dredging for the zinc balls. They'll find none. Certainly they can't see any that may be down there, twenty to thirty feet under the water! And in the course of twenty hours, I figure, such a ball would dig its own way through the mud beneath the net and be gone downstream. Therefore the problem as I see it is to have those zinc balls make their presence known."

"By ringing a bell when they hit the metal meshes?" she asked.

Forain whistled. "Hello! That's an idea; no one has thought of it. It might somehow be possible by using this new electric fluid. Still, nobody knows much about electricity as yet. No; I've devised a way. I've found a paint, made with a phosphorescent material, which will cover the ball. Upon reaching the net, the ball stops; at night it'll shine strongly."

"Won't the paint wash off?" she objected.

Forain laughed. "Not my paint! Once dry, it must be exposed to strong sunlight

for two days, to collect light. Then it'll show, as a faintly radiant presence, even from the bottom of the Seine."

"And you say nobody will use it?" she asked indignantly.

"Use it? They ridicule the very idea! However, one of the four balls put into the Seine on the first day will be treated as I suggest. If it comes through, if it's recovered, I'm vindicated; it means a lot! On the night of the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, we must watch—you and I. We must take a look every hour. Eh?"

**S**HE clapped her hands, jubilant. "Good! Good! We'll do it, yes! And if that ball comes through, and none of the others are found—"

"Then, my dear, your husband-to-be will get a government job such as he wants! We can be married at once, in other words, and let America wait till the end of the war!"

All of which, one must admit, was a deliriously happy project to the two most important people in Paris; or rather, above Paris.

By the time the hour was over, every detail was arranged. Marie, a government employee by virtue of her job in the post office, was to be furnished with a special pass; for after the first of the year that bridge and its approaches would be guarded night and day.

"I'll make the arrangements tomorrow," Forain promised as they were hauled down.

"But guard yourself!" she cautioned anxiously. "My brother Jules has sworn to wash out the memory of your blows in blood, and the others with him; they mean it, they mean it most dreadfully! You can come to watch for the balls, since there'll be plenty of soldiers around then; but meantime, stay away from our quarter completely. I'll meet you anywhere you

say, but stay away from the Bercy quarter!”

FORAIN, though he laughed at her fears and at Jules Leon as well, promised.

He had no difficulty in getting the desired pass, by telling Rampont frankly about the scheme. The director of posts laughed heartily; with Christmas a day away, even the bitter Christmas of the siege, he was indulgent to lovers. He added a special order which released Marie from her post office duties the first week in January—a girl, he said amiably, who is spending half the night working on a cold bridge, has no business trying to work by day. This, in reality, was an indication that he favored Forain’s hopes in more than one direction.

A mail balloon got off each of the three days before Christmas; then fog and unfavorable weather intervened. The next departure was on the 27th, and Forain suddenly found himself loaded down with work. The *Bayard* took out some of his new equipment on the 29th, and for two days he scarcely slept, working feverishly to equip the waiting balloons; snow and storm held off any departures during those days.

On New Year’s Day, Marie evaded the vigilance of her family—who, she stated, were indulging in a sound holiday drunk—and spent the afternoon and evening with him, at such festivities as the stricken city afforded. She warned him anew.

“Jules is more furious than ever; threats, threats, threats! His friends openly predict revolution. They have arms, for half of them are in the Republican Guard. Careful, my dear, careful! If there’s any uprising, Jules will seek your life first of all. I’m afraid he won’t wait for that, either. His words and hints alarm me to the depths!”

“Marriage will end all that,” Forain said. “I was talking yesterday with Vandenberg, the American business man who represents many firms here. He’s interested in my luminous paint. If my ball—our ball!—comes through, we can get money instantly. Vandenberg will advance it for a share in the discovery. We can be married that same day—eh? Yes?”

Her eyes warmed upon him, and she put out her hand to his.

“Done. It’s agreed, my dear! If the ball comes, it’s a lucky omen for all our lives!”

And then, next morning, Forain took up the *Newton*. She was leaving the following day, a brand new balloon, just past her inspection tests; the basket had been newly hung, and he was testing it under flight conditions.

A thousand feet, two thousand feet in air; snowy Paris was spread beneath him, and the mutter of the guns was continuous. He went about his work, completed it, and waved the flag for the cable to be hauled in. Today, up the Seine, the zinc balls were launching!

Slowly the bag came down. Forain, leaning on the edge of the basket, caught sight of a group of figures close by, on the roof of a shed in the railroad yards. Workmen, by their blouses, faces upraised, staring at him. They were close, so close that he laughed and waved his cap at them.

To his astonishment, he saw—too late—that one of them held a rifle and was aiming at him. Supposing it some joke, he waved again. He was nearly down now, on a level with them. The rifle spurted smoke; a second rifle appeared and spurted smoke. Something struck him. He was whirled around, and dropped in a heap on the floorboards of the basket.

After this, he had evil dreams; they were not coherent at all.



When he wakened, it was to darkness, flickering lights, the groans and cries of hurt men sounding all around. He was in a bed. A woman approached, bearing a light; a nurse. She looked at him, uttered an exclamation, and bent over him.

"Do you know me? Is your mind clear?"

"The devil!" exclaimed Forain weakly. He tried to rise and could not. "Of course it's clear! Where am I?"

"In a hospital. Lie quiet, now! I'll send for M. Rampont at once."

She flickered away. Rampont, eh? That made sense, anyway. Another nurse came, refused to talk or answer questions, fed him, and departed. He examined himself; his left arm was bandaged, which scarcely accounted for his weakness. He remembered now—the men on the shed, the rifles. He knew in a flash who was responsible.

No telling, however! If he gave the name of Jules Leon, the result would be terrible for Marie. Paris was rabid about spies. Her brother would be called a spy, a Prussian hireling, would be mobbed, torn to pieces! It would not be credited to any private feud. She, too, must suffer.

Decided on this point, he touched his face and started. Beard! How long had he lain here? His brain leaped to alarm. This beard, and weakness, spelled days. What about the watch on the bridge, and the submarine balls?

This query was still flaming, unanswered, when Rampont came. He advanced to the bed and Forain flung the question at him.

"How long have I been here? What does it mean?"

"Patience!" The official sat down, grasped his hands warmly. "My friend, you were shot on the second; it is now the evening of the fifth. You lost much blood before your wound was bandaged, you had

fever. Now all is well, but you'll be here for another week. I had you brought to this temporary hospital, near my own house."

"The balls! The zinc balls!" exclaimed Forain. "Have they come through?"

RAMPONT made a gesture of negation. "None, so far; not one. Now tell me—"

"Wait!" broke in Forain. "Has any watch been made at night? Good lord, man, is everything lost because I was laid up?"

"My dear fellow, all the technical men say your idea was nonsense," Rampont said compassionately. "Your paint would wash off, would be covered with mud, would not show. Let us forget the whole affair.

"The important thing is for you to tell us what you can in regard to this attack. Prussian spies, obviously; your life is invaluable to us, and they know it. Did you see the men who shot at you?"

Forain nodded. "Some men on the roof of a shed near the tracks."

He went on to tell, mechanically, the little he knew, and said nothing of what he suspected. His mind was occupied entirely with the failure of his cherished project. The thought of Marie leaped into his brain.

"Where is she? Marie Leon? Does she know about this injury to me?"

"No one knows," said Rampont. "I've kept the matter secret—"

"Then, for the love of heaven, Monsieur, send word at once to Marie Leon!"

So agonized was Forain's manner, that the kindly official at once consented. He glanced at his watch; nine o'clock. He promised to send an orderly immediately. As for the zinc balls, he shrugged anew. He himself, and everyone else, had given up hope of any result from the harebrained scheme.

He did so. More, he returned an hour later, bringing some little delicacies that the hospital could not supply, and also an astonishing bit of news.

"I had forgotten about that girl of yours, Forain," he exclaimed. "The weather's been abominable; the *Newton* got away yesterday, but a fresh snowstorm is upon us tonight. My office has been like a madhouse.

"Ah, that girl! What devotion! My messenger brought back word that he had found her—where, think you? On the Pont Nationale! On the bridge unsheltered from the blast. She has been there the past three nights. Watching for your confounded luminous ball, of course. She comes and goes, they say, or remains there by the hour."

Forain groaned. Watching for him, watching for the zinc ball—both! She must have thought he had failed her entirely, thanks to the accursed secrecy flung around him; she must have blamed him for never sending her a word or a line! Yet she had stuck to the task assigned, bitter weather or not. The eyes of Forain filled with tears.

"I know what you're thinking." Rampont spoke gently. "I regret that I forgot all about her; a thousand distractions have surrounded me, *mon ami*."

"True as steel, true as steel!" murmured Forain, and then smiled quickly. "Monsieur! May I ask a favor, a personal kindness?"

"Whatever I can do, with all my heart!"

"Then send for Marie now, tonight, at once! Get an official from the Mairie, get the formalities waived, and have us married. She needs protection from that confounded family of hers."

Rampont, on whose shoulders weighed the responsibility for the entire air mail

service, beamed joyously at this added burden. For so important an official, and in time of war and siege, with Prussian shells bursting in Paris, formalities were no barrier.

"Expect us, my friend, in an hour!" said he gayly, and departed. Before he could close the door, an excited voice called his name; an orderly appeared, panting.

"M'sieu! An important summons! The guard officer at the Pont Nationale demands your presence there—it is urgent, urgent! And a young woman is outside, demanding you and demanding this man Forain—"

Rampont exploded in a storm of Gallic oaths. Forain, who had heard the words, called out excitedly. A moment more, and in upon the room burst Marie.

"It is there, it is there!" she cried. "M. Rampont? It is there! I saw it! I pointed it out to the commanding officer—oh, my dear, my dear!"

She flung herself down beside the bed and caught Forain's hand between her cold hands, tears burning in her eyes; tears of happiness, of grief, of excitement, of triumph.

And Forain, pressing her fingers to his lips, looked up at the staring Rampont.

"Do you still want—the ceremony?"

"Thunders of heaven, yes! More than ever!" burst out Forain with a laugh.

Rampont disappeared. Marie broke forth with a flood of questions, of self-reproaches and bitter words about her brothers. They had boasted to her that Forain had his deserts; she had been half frantic these past days, being unable to learn anything about him.

"But now all's well, my dear!" she sobbed. "All's well! What was it he said—what ceremony was he talking about?"

Forain smiled, and touched her dark hair with his fingers.

“My revenge upon your family and all the others. A revenge to last for life!”

GIRAUD broke off and left the story there. We came back again to the bar of the aviators’ club, with the hurly-burly of the Bois and the Porte Maillot just outside.

“But what about this crazy zinc-ball scheme?” queried Pollack.

A twinkle in his eye, Giraud picked up the old letter in its transparent envelope. He bared a folded-over sheet showing a single stamp, a Paris address, and heavily scrawled below this, the magic formula: “Moulins, par Allier.”

“There’s the answer.” He held it up reverently. “It has lost one stamp, it’s water-stained, but it’s a letter from that first ball to come through! Not that this truly submarine mail succeeded, mind you! Of fifty or more that were sent, only

one other arrived; the rest turned up anywhere along the Seine for years after the siege. The war ended, you see, before the success of the luminous paint could be established and put into use.”

“Technically, I suppose it’s submarine mail,” conceded Pollack grudgingly. “But what about those two lovers? Did Forain get rich off that luminous paint?”

Giraud passed a hand over his bald dome, gave me a whimsical wink, and glanced at Pollack’s thinning locks.

“No. He got rich off a hair-restorer he invented! I think I mentioned that he had a tendency to baldness—eh? I’ll give you the address in Cincinnati, and you can get the recipe from the family. You can see for yourselves what the restorer did for me!”

Pollack surveyed us blankly, and then broke into a grin. “I get you, feller! The drinks are on me.”